

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUND TABLE WITH COLONEL THOMAS MCGRATH,
COMMANDER, AFGHANISTAN REGIONAL SECURITY INTEGRATION COMMAND-SOUTH SUBJECT:
UPDATE ON THE AFGHAN NATIONAL ARMY'S 205TH HERO CORPS AND OTHER ISSUES
MODERATOR: LIEUTENANT JENNIFER CRAGG, OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE OF
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LT. CRAGG: Welcome, sir, to the Bloggers Roundtable for Friday, August
1st. I know you've been a guest on the Bloggers Roundtable in the past so I'll
get on with it.

My name is Lieutenant Jennifer Cragg with the Office of the Secretary
of Defense of Public Affairs and I'll be moderating our call today.

We have a number of bloggers on the call -- we have seven. So with
that, please remember, just clearly state you name and blogger organization.
For speed of time, I'm going to go through one question for each and then we'll
go round robin again. So with that, we'll turn it over to Colonel Thomas
McGrath. He has spent the last 14 months deployed in southern Afghanistan.

And sir, I'll turn it over to you and you can start with an opening
statement.

COL. MCGRATH: Okay, hey great. Thank you, Lieutenant Cragg.

Hey, good morning, everybody, and thanks for inviting me to speak with
you today. I'll be leaving here in a week or so -- maybe two, maybe less. So
after 14 months here as the commander of the ARSIC of the Afghan Regional
Security Integration Command, I've seen a lot of good things happen -- many
positive changes that have taken place here in southern Afghanistan.

First, let me talk about some of the latest changes and developments in
the Afghan National Army and the 205th Hero Corps that's located right here at
Kandahar Airfield. We're preparing plans to field significant quantities of
modern equipment to the 205th Corps, starting in the latter part of this year,
which will give the ANA another significant improvement in their tactical
capability and their ability to take the fight to the insurgency. This includes
up- armored humvees -- some 250 vehicles per brigade. It will give the ANA a
much greater survivability against both ambushes, IEDs or mines. The humvee
fielding program starts here shortly.

Other equipment fielding also includes trading out ANA (crew serve ?)
weapons with heavier infantry weapons, which are of the former Warsaw Pact
nations, which is interesting. And finally, we'll be assuring that the ANA has
an effective field artillery capabilities for their troops, which is a
significant increase in their capability.

The growth of the strong and capable noncommissioned officer cadre, their NCOs -- which we all know are the backbone of any army -- is also progressing extremely well where we have in excess of 500 soldiers from the corps, which have trained and qualified for promotion in the last six months. We're approaching their maximum numbers of NCOs, which is about 2,500 that were promoted over the last year. Very important, because as we increase their capabilities, you have to have the right noncommissioned officers leading those squads and platoons, in some cases.

We do have, through a series of NCO leadership courses -- we just completed a couple in the last few months which added an additional 200 soldiers for promotion. And we'll probably promote another 400 to 500 on their traditional freedom day, which is in August, where they seem to have mass promotions across the country. So this is really good news.

The team leader courses, which is even better news, were conducted by ANA NCOs. We used to bring in other nations. Now they have their own conducting of courses. They've also taken a central role in the M-16 conversation, and will also be central to the success of the humvee fielding and any other weapons systems that are fielded to the corps.

They're also making great strides in their ability to plan and execute tactical operations independently of the coalition, with the exception of any -- some combat support enablers that they don't have yet and that's calling on things like air support.

The corps planned -- just recently, the corps planned, coordinated and executed a huge vehicle convoy up through enemy territory to an isolated base without any coalition support and they were very successful in doing it. It was a very good exercise.

And they also conducted the first ever air causality evacuation or CASEVAC or MEDEVAC a few weeks ago where the local national was flown in by the Afghan National Army Air Corps aircraft to the regional hospital that we have here on Kandahar Army Airfield. So that was great news bringing in these helicopters. And we're also using them for supply and assault purposes also.

When I last spoke to you guys, I think it was in June, we talked about the Kandahar prison break that at just happened. At that time, the Afghans planned and executed an offensive operation in the Arghandab district in Kandahar in the latter part of June. They cleared anti-government elements from the villages. This operation marked the first led by the 205th corps, conducted in partnership with ISAF.

This operation demonstrated the agility of the Afghan forces. Within 24 hours, the Ministry of Defense and 205th Corps deployed several thousand soldiers into the area from Kabul and other places with the proper logistics support. So that's a great new story.

These are just a few examples of how we're helping them out to create a more professional fighting Afghan army -- let alone the national police too. They're improving also. We're building on the momentum that we've helped manifest, namely to construct a capacity to have strong and professional -- professionalism in the army and the police are increasing on a daily basis. And the army now interacts with the Taliban and other enemies of Afghanistan and they're doing extremely well against them.

Just the other day they conducted -- they had a Taliban force that was infiltrating across our area. They've made contact. We went over to them, asked them about what was going on. They said they had it under complete control. They were able to surround the enemy and kill 30 to 40 to include several from foreign nations.

They contain and conduct their own operations with our assistance and we'll continue to help them out, as they continue to grow. But we're looking over their shoulders, kind of so to speak. They're not completely independent, but we're getting closer and closer every day. We're also building and sustaining a regional operation coordination center, which will help the ANA and the Afghan National Police receive and respond to assistance from Afghan citizens, but also to coordinate any local exercises that are needed to counter any Taliban infiltrations or attacks.

Their confidence is very high. The capabilities are even higher and it's all coming into place right now. We've still got some ways to go, but it's looking really good.

So I'm very, very excited about what we've accomplished here in the last year and I'm very optimistic about the future. Professionalism and the progress in Afghanistan are increasing at a very good rate. Every day we're seeing and experiencing more situations whereby the Afghans have taken the lead and doing extremely well.

And I'm very proud to have served as the commander for ARSIC South over the past 14 months. I'm looking forward to your questions and that's -- that's my opening statement. Thanks.

LT. CRAGG: Great. Thank you, sir.

Who joined us while Colonel McGrath was speaking?

Q This is Grim with blackfive.net.

LT. CRAGG: Great. You're number eight on the list.

Go ahead and start with Andrew.

Q Okay. Hey, Colonel, Andrew Lubin from U.S. Naval Institutes Proceedings.

How are you doing this afternoon, sir?

COL. MCGRATH: Good. Good to hear from you again. How are you doing?

Q Good, thanks. I wish I was over there with you guys. I keep having to come back here and spend time back in the back -- which is no good.

Sir, 201st Corps is probably the cream of the Afghan crop. How would rank the 205th? And are you getting enough recruits, because you're in probably the hotspot for Afghanistan at this point?

COL. MCGRATH: Hello?

Q Yes. Can you hear us?

COL. MCGRATH: Yeah. Can you say that again? I lost you. You said 201st Corps and then I lost you.

Q I said 201st Corps is said to be about the best in the Afghan Army. How does the 205th Corps measure up and are they getting enough recruits for the missions they have down there? Because Helmand province and Nimroz -- you're probably in the hotspot in Afghanistan at this point.

COL. MCGRATH: Oh, we sure are. We're the main effort down here.

The 201st, the 205th -- I don't have too much interaction with the 201st. I can just tell you what the 205th is doing.

The 201st Corps is -- you know, they have a lot of assistance from the other elements that are in-country -- a lot of resources. And that's what we don't have down here in the 205th Corps. We need more mentors.

However, the 201st is in a pretty good fight also and they're doing quite well, but we're in one heck of a fight. I think we've got the enemy on the back foot, so I feel very confident in their capabilities compared with anybody else.

Q All right. Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. Let's go onto the second caller. It was Bruce, please.

Q Hey, Colonel. Bruce McQuain with qando.net.

Could you address -- as far as part of the development of the 205th Corps -- where they are with their intel capability and where they are with their sustainability piece?

COL. MCGRATH: Let me answer the last. Sustainability -- they're coming along quite well, not as well as I'd like. It's really a change in culture on how they do things from the old Soviet models of storing things and then getting permission from higher to release those stores.

However, we're working with them. We're very aggressive about it and telling them how to set up logistics reports and able to get the equipment out on a timely basis. So they're doing okay.

And what was that first part again?

Q The intel capability.

COL. MCGRATH: Intel -- interesting. They're doing quite well, but not with all the things that -- all the stuff that we have. They have a lot of contacts and things that they use internally. I trust their intelligence. When they come to me and say, "Somebody is at X", I'm pretty darn sure that they're going to be at point X.

We assist them in developing, you know, the IPB -- intelligence preparation for battlefield -- so that we can show them how, you know, where the enemy may be moving and things of that nature. But I'll tell you: if they say they're there, that's where they are.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. Maggie, next question.

Q Hey, Southie.

COL. MCGRATH: Hey, how're you doing there, Maggie?

Q I'm good. My question has to do with an article I read in the Times last weekend about drug trafficking in Helmand province. When you talk to the Afghan offices that you're training, bringing up, mentoring, what's their attitude about drug trafficking and drug eradication efforts on our part?

COL. MCGRATH: Well, they all know that opium's wrong. It's anti-Islam. It goes against their values, but there's lots of it, so there's no mistaking that part.

We do interdict drugs a lot, find them in the local areas. We'll burn them, we'll turn them over to the locals or just get rid of them ourselves.

But it's ingrained in their society right now, and that's something that the United States government and the coalition are working to put together strategies to get rid of that stuff.

However, it's going to take a huge -- or a international strategy, if you will, if we want to get rid of that. And it's a lot more than just burning a few acres here and there or taking one or two people out. It has to be a huge operation.

I think it's one of those dirty little secrets the Afghans have. It's not much of a secret, however. (Chuckles.) But it's been part of their society for so long, it's hard for them just to step back from it.

Q But do they see drug eradication as part of the fight against the Taliban?

COL. MCGRATH: Yes. We have drug eradication forces, and security forces then for the drug eradication forces.

Q Thanks.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. Kate?

Q Yeah, this is Kate Wiltrout from the Virginian Pilot.

Colonel, I wanted to ask a little bit -- you gave a pretty glowing report of how things are going, and yet most of what we're reading is that the fight in Afghanistan is getting tougher by the day.

Only two weeks ago we had the base in Wanat, Afghanistan, overrun by a pretty coordinated anti-coalition group. And if you could just tell me a little bit about the challenges. We know it's tough over there, but I didn't hear a whole lot in your opening statement that indicates just how tough it might be.

COL. MCGRATH: Okay. First, I think things are going well at the tactical, the operations, strategic level, especially down at the tactical level. We're taking the fight to the enemy, as opposed to them taking it to us. We're the ones initiating the attacks, things of that nature. So when you see

the numbers going up, it's because of us. We're going to places we hadn't been before, and we're hitting their sanctuaries and we're being quite successful. We don't do a lot of body counts, but there's been a lot killed. There's also been an increase of the capacity. For instance, the growing of the police forces that we have going on throughout the country.

The parts down here, it's a very austere environment. We've got people living in mud huts down at Kandahar, and downtown. They still cook the way they did 300 (years), 400 (years), 1,000 years ago -- open fires and open -- things of that nature.

The IEDs are difficult, but we have methods of dealing with those that are effective. The way the enemy is able to slip back into the population is difficult, but in a counterinsurgency, it's patience. You have to have patience. You have to be able to think things out properly in how to -- (audio break) -- these guys. It's a lot -- yeah, it's very difficult in doing so.

The heat doesn't help. It's 125 degrees down here on a regular basis. Yeah, it's absolutely, absolutely a difficult fight. There's no doubt about it. I've lost 23 guys here in the last year and I've had over 100 wounded. Don't get me wrong; nothing that we do over here is easy, but we do have the momentum and I feel very optimistic about things in the future.

Q Okay, thanks.

LT. CRAGG: Kieran (sp)?

Q Yes, I thank you for your time and efforts. Are most of the people coming across the border, the Taliban, are they just cannon fodder, like very poor, young, Pashtun or Dari, or are they actually trained foreign fighters? Are they Chechens, Arabs, whatever? What are the types of enemy that we're seeing out there?

COL. MCGRATH: Well, you get all types. All of those people you mentioned. Some are better trained than others, but overall I don't think they're that well trained. I think they just tell them to come up for the summer and shoot at Americans, and they get killed. And we kill lots of them, so you see various types.

I don't think they're that good. They're smart, they're cunning; they can have some spectacular attacks that we've seen. But, for instance, if you go one-on-one with them, it's no match. We beat them every time. But it's much bigger than that.

It's an enemy that isn't thinking. It's an enemy that isn't trying to improve the lifestyle of the Afghan people. That's the Afghan government that they're building, along with our help, building schools, roads, hospitals, things of that nature.

So you just have this violent group of thugs that have been brainwashed and they're coming across and creating chaos amongst the people. But they haven't had much success, really, in a tactical area or in the operational area. They haven't done anything to reduce the capabilities of us or the Afghan government.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, next is Sharon.

Q I want to apologize because I feel like I have a widget question.

You mentioned, and it wasn't clear to me from what you said at the beginning about swapping in or swapping out old Warsaw Pact equipment. There have been a number of reports about problems with basically former Soviet Bloc-origin equipment. How much are the military and equipment coming from Eastern Europe? How much from the United States? And what are the advantages or disadvantages of both?

COL. MCGRATH: Well, we haven't got any from the Warsaw Pact nations. I just heard that -- (audio break) -- I don't have any details. But I'm getting the M-16s that we're trading out with the Kalashnikovs, and we're trading out our Humvees -- well, we're bringing in the Humvees.

Initially, I wouldn't say they're problems; they're just challenges to get the weapons in and get them out while you're in the middle of a fight. So we have some very detailed training plans in doing so. And quite frankly, we've done pretty darn well. We're at about 65 (percent), 70 percent of the core that's traded out with M16s.

The good thing about that is M16s are a better weapon. You have to aim when you shoot. You have to take care of them; they're easier to maintain, actually, spare parts and things of that nature.

A lot of the older weapons that the Afghans had -- in fact, old -- the parts weren't there, there are mismatched weapons in parts and ammo and things of that nature. So I think this is a good step forward.

They were a little nervous at first about trading out their AK-47s, but I was just talking to several of them yesterday out in Zabul province, and they seemed to be very happy with their M16s.

Q Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, Troy?

Q Okay. Hey, sir, how are you doing? Troy from Blue Hammer (ph).

COL. MCGRATH: Good. How're you doing?

Q Good. Good. Over the last -- reflecting on the last 15 months, what would you say is the one thing in the Afghan forces whether it be army or police, that you feel is the -- has been the most improved over that time since you've been on the ground?

COL. MCGRATH: I think it's their ability to work together. The Afghan national army and the police are coming together with coordination cells so they can discuss future operations. We meet regularly together as a group to plan and to execute operations. So that is probably the biggest change that I've seen when it comes to command-and-control issues and things of that nature.

Q All right. Thank you, sir.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, to Grimm?

Q Yes. I would like actually to follow up on the question about equipment and ask a little bit more about the spares issue, the parts issue,

particularly for the aircraft you were talking about earlier. COL. MCGRATH: Oh -- did you say spare parts for the aircraft? I don't think I mentioned --

Q For the aircraft, yeah. The maintenance for the aircraft that you were discussing.

COL. MCGRATH: Okay. When we bring the aircraft in, we do have contracted maintenance that we've put into place. And we only have a few aircraft, and I won't give out the numbers.

But aircraft have very sensitive pieces of equipment, so they do very thorough checks on them, so if they're down, they're down for a good reason. But we haven't had any major problems with that.

Does that answer your question?

Q In terms of the contracted maintenance support, who's providing that? Not, obviously, the name of the company or anything, but is it a foreign company or local Afghan or --

COL. MCGRATH: Geez, I'm not sure, to be honest with you. I don't want to give a wrong answer.

Q Fair enough.

COL. MCGRATH: Yeah, I'm sorry. (Chuckles.)

LT. CRAGG: Okay. We have time really for a short -- any last minute questions.

Q I have a quick one. Colonel, Andrew Lubin again.

Colonel, going back to the question on the M16s, what kind of accountability is built into this? This is -- ANA has a reputation for selling their boots and their equipment. What's the chance they're going to try and be selling off their M16s?

COL. MCGRATH: Well, we haven't seen any yet. We'll find out if they're in the hands of the Taliban, if we see them on the battlefield.

Right now we have a pretty good security program. They're properly inventoried, two serial numbers, they're put into the system, they're sent down in the proper secured boxes and Conexes and arms rooms. And then we do the same at each echelon.

So the good news is that when a soldier gets an M16, it's assigned to him. In the old days, they just kind of stacked their AK- 47s up on top of each other, literally. And they'd pick one up -- you'd have weapon A today and weapon D tomorrow. But now each weapon is assigned to a person, so if a weapon is lost on the battlefield or given away or a group are given away, we'll be able to track them back. But we haven't had any issues with that at all. So that seems --

I feel comfortable with the security that we have for the weapons systems. We put a lot of work into it. So it's moving along well right now.

Q Okay. Thank you.

Q Sir, could you repeat the stats you gave earlier on the up-armored Humvees and how many are going to which brigades?

COL. MCGRATH: Lots. Let me get my paper here. (Chuckles.) Give us two second here. Sorry.

Q Sure.

(Pause.)

COL. MCGRATH: We've got 250 right now per brigade.

Q Okay. And is that number -- did you say -- is that going to be going up, or that's what you're at for now?

COL. MCGRATH: Oh, we haven't got them yet. We'll be integrating them in here shortly.

Q Okay.

COL. MCGRATH: And the Humvee is -- really, they have Ford Rangers-type vehicles. Your average pickup truck. These'll increase their force protection and also increase their ability to move more soldiers safely and also their firepower that they can put on these weapons, so -- and you can put more radios and things like that in there. So we're looking forward to that.

They do have a couple over there already. Probably, I think the number's about 60 to 70 right now, and they've been working out pretty well. But we're going to increase the numbers exponentially here, shortly.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. Troy with your last question?

Q All right.

Sir, let's go back on the prison break. There was an in-depth analysis written by a Mr. Smith on Globe and Mail. It was actually posted on their ARSIC South blog.

I was wondering if you'd had a chance to read it and, if so, did you have any comments pro or con on its content or accuracy or anything? It was really in-depth.

COL. MCGRATH: You know, you bloggers'll hate this, but my Web site is blocked in my office. I can't read -- (audio break) -- Web site. (Laughter.) So I don't know what he said about it. I have to apologize.

Q I'm sure your PAO could get you a copy, sir, if you need it. It was really a -- I pushed it on mine. It was really in-depth, and it looked like he had a lot of inside information. So I was just kind of curious if you'd had a chance, but -- COL. MCGRATH: No. I'll track it down, and have her do push-ups after this to make sure she gets me the copy.

Was there anything particular about that you wanted to ask?

Q Well, he just seemed to really have a lot of information on the coordination. I know originally we had -- it was discussed that it was pretty

much just a hit and it was not really -- it was kind of a soft target, per se, from U.S. standards.

The article -- like I say, he had a lot of inside information, it appeared, and he talked about how they started diversionary attacks. They had a backup plan, essentially, when the B-bid (ph) didn't go off, and they initiated it manually. Just a lot of stuff like that, that I was wondering if you felt it was really that coordinated.

COL. MCGRATH: You know, I didn't know any diversionary attack. That's what every young E3 or E4 at, you know, the basic course, learns on how to conduct an attack and how to have a backup. They didn't have anything major that diverted the forces out of the area.

We were very disappointed with the police chief's response to what happened. He got fired a few days after this happened. So again, yeah, they pulled it off. Absolutely. Was it something out of James Bond or some sort of Delta Force thing? I'd say no.

Q All right. Yeah, there was quite a bit in there too about how they had went through and warned the local town, the villagers to stay away, that they'd kind of given some people a heads-up. And unfortunately, if that happened, there was no -- they didn't pass that information on to your intel gatherers. But --

COL. MCGRATH: They do that often. They'll come around and they'll tell people there's something happening -- (audio break) -- conduct their attacks. That's common also.

The Taliban don't want to lose the support of the population, so they claim. They try not to kill a lot, but they do, unfortunately. So again, they pulled it off. It was done; the prisoners, a lot of them got away. We've captured some of them, killed a lot of them. But I wasn't overly impressed.

If the police chief had acted responsibly, cordoned off the area, we probably would have got a lot of those back very quickly.

Q Thank you, sir.

LT. CRAGG: Well, with that, sir, I'm going to turn it back over to you, Colonel McGrath, if you want to end with any closing statements? COL. MCGRATH: Well, I tell you, I've been here for 14 months. It's been quite an experience. Any time you get to lead soldiers in combat and command them, it's quite an honor and an opportunity.

We've worked very hard in our mission to bring up the capacity and the capability of the Afghan army and the police, and we've done it with a lot of American blood. Twenty-three soldiers killed in action, over 100 wounded. We've been fighting with less resources than other organizations around Afghanistan and Iraq.

But through the efforts of very many brave men and women, tough men and women -- soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines -- we're completing our mission. And we're setting the stages for the future operations and for the future of the Afghan army and the police in bringing stability to this country. So I'm very happy, very proud of the efforts of our war fighters over here.

And it's tough going home. It's -- I need to go home; I've been here for a while. Got to see the wife and kids, but it's tough leaving such great young people that we have over here fighting for the stability of this country, which is directly related to the security of our nation.

LT. CRAGG: With that, thank you, sir. And if there's any follow-up questions after the call, you can please -- any of the bloggers, please pass them to me and I'll get them to Colonel McGrath's PAO.

So with that, today's program will be available on line at the bloggers link on DOD.mil. There'll be a story based on today's call, along with the audio file and transcript.

So with that, thank you, Colonel McGrath and everybody that joined the call today.

Q Thanks.

Q Colonel, thank you very much.

COL. MCGRATH: Okay. Thank you.

END.